



Well Fashioned: Eco Style in the UK
Crafts Council, London
2006
Interview with Rebecca Earley – Curator

Why did you want to develop the Well Fashioned exhibition?

The fashion industry has been something that has intrigued me for the last 15 years. In 1996 I started teaching at Chelsea College of Art and Design and became involved in a research project there, I became aware of how polluting and damaging the textile and fashion industry was (on a par with the chemical industry)ⁱ and once I started unearthing some of those facts it really became quite shocking; I started to think, *'I've been contributing to this pollution both as a maker and as a consumer'*. Since then, I've been collecting information and case studies of designers and products and gathering general information about the fashion and textile industry, incorporating it into my practice; making my studio practice and the textiles I use as green as possible and to try and come up with new products that would perform better environmentally. Also whilst teaching I was very aware that I was constantly speaking to new generations of designers who were being taught a great deal about the aesthetics of design, but very little about the environmental effects of those design decisions. Between 80-90% of the total life cycle cost of any product (environmental and economic) are determined by the product design before production even begins.ⁱⁱ This places a huge amount of responsibility into the hands of the designer.

What sort of ecological concerns are addressed through the grouping of the designer/makers in *Well Fashioned*?

There are many decisions to be made when designing, making and wearing fashion. The materials and production techniques at the beginning of the life cycle; in this exhibition we've looked at organic fabrics, natural dyes and Fair Trade produced garments. There are huge issues surrounding this stage of the life cycle, for example: 1,000,000 cases of poisoning and possibly 20,000 deaths each year are attributable to the pesticides applied to cotton.ⁱⁱⁱ This is very shocking because we use so much cotton in the industry. The population as a whole is becoming a lot more aware of food production methods like organic or genetically modified crops, and I feel it's time to explore those same issues with clothing and textiles. The exhibition also looks at the ideas around multifunction; how garments have been designed to change, transform and extend their potential life cycle. Take Ben Shine's work, if you can have a garment that can change and become short or long sleeved, an anorak or a T-shirt, you potentially would need fewer garments! I think that's a really exciting concept and I think we've got a long way to go in the industry to explore that concept, but Ben is here to represent those ideas. We also look at the ethos behind the companies, particularly howies; they really believe in ecological design and they take it right through to their everyday lifestyles; relocating from London to Wales, campaigning for real bread, cycling everywhere, using the outdoors as their playground – that whole ethos runs through to the clothing that they design and the messaging that they put across to the consumer. Recycling is in the exhibition too, I've tried to look for new approaches to recycling; customising, the interaction with the consumer, narratives, trying to increase consumer attachment to a garment, allowing the wearer to have some sense of its history.

Eco Fashion, is that a modern phenomenon?

The term certainly is modern, but the idea of reusing old textiles and products certainly isn't. During the Second World War the 'Make do and Mend' campaign showed us the range of

possibilities for reusing textiles around the home (it is a well documented design theory). But what we're experiencing now is the huge growth of consumerism in the western world. Fashion trends are changing so much faster than they used to; we can now buy clothes in supermarkets (in fact the clothes in supermarkets are often the ones featured in fashion magazines) so there's a real sense of disposability; new collections come in and out of the high street in 6-8 weeks. The demand for cheaper clothing and a shorter expected life cycle is stimulating the desire within our society for this kind of clothing and eco fashion is becoming a pressing idea.

So the idea of recycling in fashion is not new, but combined with the other elements that the exhibition talks about makes up one new approach: Eco Fashion.

Yes, definitely, some of the concepts in the exhibition borrow from product design or from architecture, because in those disciplines eco ideas have been explored to much greater depth. I think that this is the first time we've been able to see these different approaches put together and labelled as Eco Style – Eco Fashion.

Some people might be surprised at the level of synthetic fabrics used by designer/makers in the exhibition. Can you explain how they are ecological?

We often think of eco or green fashion being of natural fibres like cotton, wool, silk or linen, but when you look at the research there's a big argument to do with how clothes are worn and washed and this is where polyester and other synthetics come into their own. If you think of the life cycle of a garment in three-stages: 1. Production 2. Use (wearing/washing) 3. Disposal. Recent research shows 90-95% of environmental energy used on a garment occurs during the *use* phase.^{iv} If you compare a polyester blouse with a cotton blouse in use terms: you can wash polyester at a lower temperature, it air dries very quickly, and you don't need to iron often, so its energy consumption is much lower compared to a cotton blouse. The other issue is about recycling and re-use; polyester has come from oil, basically petrochemical sources (which is not good), but polyester and other synthetic fibres can be recycled and down-cycling doesn't necessarily occur (unlike when we recycle glass and get a lower grade product). There's great potential to use synthetics and with careful use and design, that's a really exciting idea.

So when we look at the clothes in the exhibition, what are the specific things about their design and production that makes them more eco friendly?

I'd like to focus this answer on the cheaper end of the clothing market because of the huge volume, fast turnover and cheap labour involved. When you think about the whole process of making a garment you have to start off with fibre; the growing and production of the fibres and the energy, water and chemicals used in that process; then making the fabric; knitting or weaving the fibres, dyeing and finishing (again, energy, water, chemicals and labour). The next stage is making up a garment and often at the lower end of the market that's where there are bad labour conditions. In the UK we pay out £30bn a year on clothes, that's around £500 per person, 90% of garment workers are women working in factories or as home workers. In China the wage that is required for a basic standard of living is 60p per hour, but the standard pay is 16p per hour.^v There's an imbalance between how we value the labour and the fashion industry. The garment then goes to the shops and it is marketed (trend setting) and there is a very fast turnaround of garments on the shelves. Environmental impacts occur at the laundering stage once we've bought our garments and at the disposal stage. Few people bag up their old garments for recycling or put them in a charity shop, something like 500,000 tons of textiles end up in land-fill every year. In between these stages of the life of a garment, there's transportation because the other thing that is very particular to the garment industry is that none of these processes take place in the same country; the fibre is shipped to where the fabric is made, the fabric is shipped to separate production and finishing processes and we end up with a £10 skirt which has travelled thousands and thousands of miles, has involved lots of pesticides, chemicals, water, cheap labour – and it feels wrong. The *Well Fashioned* designer/makers are looking at these different stages. It's important to understand that with eco fashion you can't address the whole process because the stages are so complex. You can't say, '*I'm going to make the ultimate green garment and address the issues at every stage*', larger companies would go bust if they did. These smaller companies are illustrating how by dealing with one or two of the issues along the chain of production, they are making slightly better garments. One is working with organic fabrics, OsvoMode; Enamore is working

with hemp; juste. is the label that works with Fair Trade and traditional fabrics. We also have designers who are trying to design classics (keeping away from trends). They design garments that are multisex and are designed to be kept and cherished and handed down (Amy Twigger's 'Keep and Share' label). We have a designer in the exhibition who is considering how things are used – that's Ben Shine - and we have a designer who is recycling and customising and looking at the disposal stage. I've set out the exhibition in a way that allows you to take the journey that a garment would go on.

Given that factors you've just outlined of the stages a garment would go through, are we able to shop ecologically for everyday clothes?

The answer to that is yes, and no. Quite clearly there's a lot of clothing on the high street that doesn't consider these issues at all. But we have put together a shopping guide and once we started to do this research, we found there was a huge amount of choice of companies out there that were producing organic, Fair Trade, recycled and customised goods, but they are on the fringes of the industry so they are not getting the main stream press coverage and they are not on our high street. Consequently, it's much harder to find them. By putting together the guide we aim to show people that there is variety out there, you can buy everyday basics, it just might mean changing the way you would shop, instead of a Saturday afternoon on the high street, they might order some things on the internet and go swimming instead!

In what ways do you see eco fashion developing in the future?

I would say that there was room for developing a more conceptual approach to garment design. Think about how garments could be designed to be washed less often or garments that would increase our emotional attachment to them so we're less inclined to throw them away so quickly. To design a garment that has its life cycle taken into account e.g. If it is designed to only last 2 months, could it have a lower ecological footprint? Or could we be making classics that are going to be around a long time? If you look in the information leaflet, there are two websites: 5ways and lifetimes^{vi}, which show the research where we've really looked at those issues and made prototypes. We also need to think in the future about how government can be involved with the fashion industry. If you think about 'stamps of approval' or the way that fridges and freezers are graded with their energy consumption, could you try to imagine some kind of grading for garments? – sounds terribly scary and a little bit boring and not what you're looking for when you're buying a new outfit, but I do believe that consumers want to know more about what they're consuming. I hope that the future would be full of more designers like those in the exhibition; small companies, individuals' making beautiful things well – this is where craft and design in the UK could really have its moment, because this is what we're good at.

So with all of the ideas and information within the exhibition, what are you hoping the visitors will take away with them?

A really good sense of style and fun and awareness. I want people to feel that they can choose clothing that is better environmentally but is also very stylish. On the consumer side of things, I'd like the audience to go away and be able to consider next time they are buying clothes:

- what it is that they are buying,
- why they want it,
- how long they think they are going to use it,
- could they buy it from a better outlet.

I want students and graduates and young designers to go back to their creative work and think about how they could approach their design projects with the environment in mind because at the end of the day, this exhibition is about a new approach to design; not just thinking about the aesthetics, not just thinking about trend and colour and cut, but thinking about the how, the why and what for.

ⁱ Fletcher, K. T. (1999), Environmental Improvement by Design: An Investigation of the UK Textile Industry, PhD thesis, Chelsea College of Art & Design, The London Institute

ⁱⁱ Graedel, T.E., Reaves Comrie, P. and Sekutowski, J.C. (1995), Green Product Design, AT&T Technical Journal. November/December, pp.18-25, as cited in Fletcher, K. T. (1999), *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Ethical Consumer Magazine, December 1997 / January 1998, p.10

^{iv} Life cycle analysis (LCA) report compiled for American Fiber Manufacturers Association by Franklin Associates, June 1993, as cited in Fletcher, K. T. (1999), *ibid*

^v See the Well Fashioned fact sheets online at www.craftscouncil.org.uk

^{vi} Kate Fletcher and Mathilde Tham's AHRC funded Lifetimes project (2004), www.lifetimes.info, and Rebecca Earley and Kate Fletcher's AHRC funded 5ways project (2002), www.5ways.info